ERIC Document Resume	See Instruction Sheet	DATE OF RESUME 8/31/65	DATE RECEIVED

A. PUBLICATION DATA

1. ERIC NUMBER	2. ORIGINATOR CONTROL NO(S).	3. IDENTIFICATION NO.	DO NOT WRITE IN SPACE BELOW
ED000970	R2 p.9		

4. AUTHOR(S):
Milholland, John E.

5. TITLE OF DOCUMENT ABSTRACTED:
Academic Performance of Transfer Students

6. PUBLICATION TITLE:
University of Michigan Official Publication

7. EDITOR(S):
N.A.

8. PLACE OF ORIGIN
University of Michigan
ORG.
ST.
CITY, STATE
Ann Arbor, Michigan
TELE. EXT.
INST/LOC CODE

9. PUBLISHER OR SOURCE
University of Michigan

10. VOL.	11. PAGES	12. MO./YR.	13. TOTAL PP.
LIX	7-14	Apr. 58	8

MICROFILM COPY AVAILABLE
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TYPE OF REPORT
PROPOSAL ☐
IN-PROGRESS ☐
FINAL ☒
FOLLOW-UP ☐

OTHER ERIC REFERENCES:

ERIC SATELLITE CODE.

B. INDEXING DATA

14. SUBJECT AREA

15. TYPE OF ENDEAVOR
experimental study

16. INDEXING TERMS (6-12)

experimental studies		achievement			
articulation		measurement			
students					

17. ABSTRACT (MAX. 250 WORDS)

Data for one year on discussion of variables bearing on performance and suggestions for further research.

ERIC No.

18. SOURCE OF ABSTRACT

C. FUNDING DATA

19. SUPPORTING ORGANIZATION	20. DIVISION OR DEPT.	21. CONTRACT NO. / PROJECT NO.
	22. TOTAL COST OF PROJECT	
	23. DURATION OR PROJECT	U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Office of Education

ERIC Form 1

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION AND WELFARE
Office of Education

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Academic Performance of Transfer Students

To begin with, the title of this paper "Academic Performance of Transfer Students" is wrong, even though I picked it out myself. To make it correct, the word "Performance" should be replaced by the plural, "Performances," for as I looked over the data on the records of transfer students, nothing was more impressive than the diversity of their performances. Dr. Groesbeck, the Director of our Office of Registration and Records, wrote his thesis on transfer students from community colleges, and in his review of the literature grouped the studies into three categories: those which reported transfer students to be superior; those which found them to be about on a par with "native" students; and those in which they were inferior.

The results, of course, dealt with averages, and it should always be borne in mind that there is variability about any average. So the general conclusion about the academic performances of transfer students, if you want it now, is that some do well and some don't. It may be profitable, however, not to stop there, but to inquire into some of the variables which seem to have a bearing on what transfer students do in their receiving colleges.

It seems to me there are at least three dimensions in any given transfer situation. The first two are fairly obvious; they are the sending and the receiving institutions. The third is a little more subtle, but seems important. It is the question of whether or not the student would

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have been eligible to enter the receiving college directly from high school. Suppose we consider this last aspect first.

The University of California has probably been more consistent than any other institution in its research on transfer students. They have repeatedly found that transfers from junior colleges who would have qualified for admission to the University immediately upon graduation from high school do better than those who would not have. They also do better in their junior colleges, incidentally. These findings are paralleled for the University of Michigan Literary College by Dr. Groesbeck's thesis. In both the University and the community college, the student who was eligible for admission to the University as a freshman earned the better record, on the average. The conclusion we may draw from these data, is, I think, that the so-called "late bloomer" is relatively rare. Although it may be true that motivations, interests, and ambitions may blossom fairly late, abilities do not seem to. The best predictors of what a person's performance at any given academic level may be are still evidences of ability in preceding work.

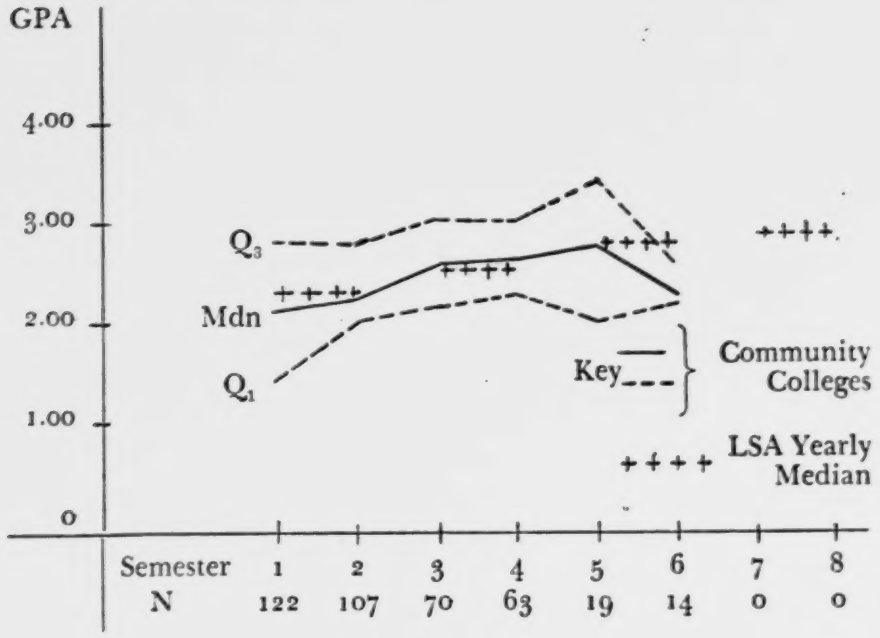
I shall turn now to a consideration of the actual records of transfer students, and here I must become regrettably specific because, as I mentioned before, there is no generic "transfer student." What I have to say in this connection will in the main be concerned with students transferring to the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts at the University of Michigan.

The largest single segment, just under 45%, of our extramural transfer students come from the community colleges of Michigan. Figure 1 shows the grade-point-average (GPA) for the members of this group who came into the Literary College in the fall of 1954. For purposes of reference, I have put in, as horizontal lines, the yearly medians for LSA students in 1955–56. Since almost all our transfers come in at the sophomore or junior levels, the comparisons might be more meaningful if the LSA lines were shifted to the left by two semesters.

You will note the decline in numbers from semester to semester. Some of this is due to graduation, some to transfer to other units within the University, and too much, unfortunately, to failure to meet academic standards. Dr. Groesbeck found, for example, that 36% of junior college transfers in 1951 and 1952 failed to make a C average their first semester here, and 19% were eventually sent home.

FIGURE 1

Grade-point Averages, Semester by Semester, of Students Who Transferred to the University of Michigan College of Literature, Science, and the Arts from Michigan Community Colleges in the Fall of 1954.

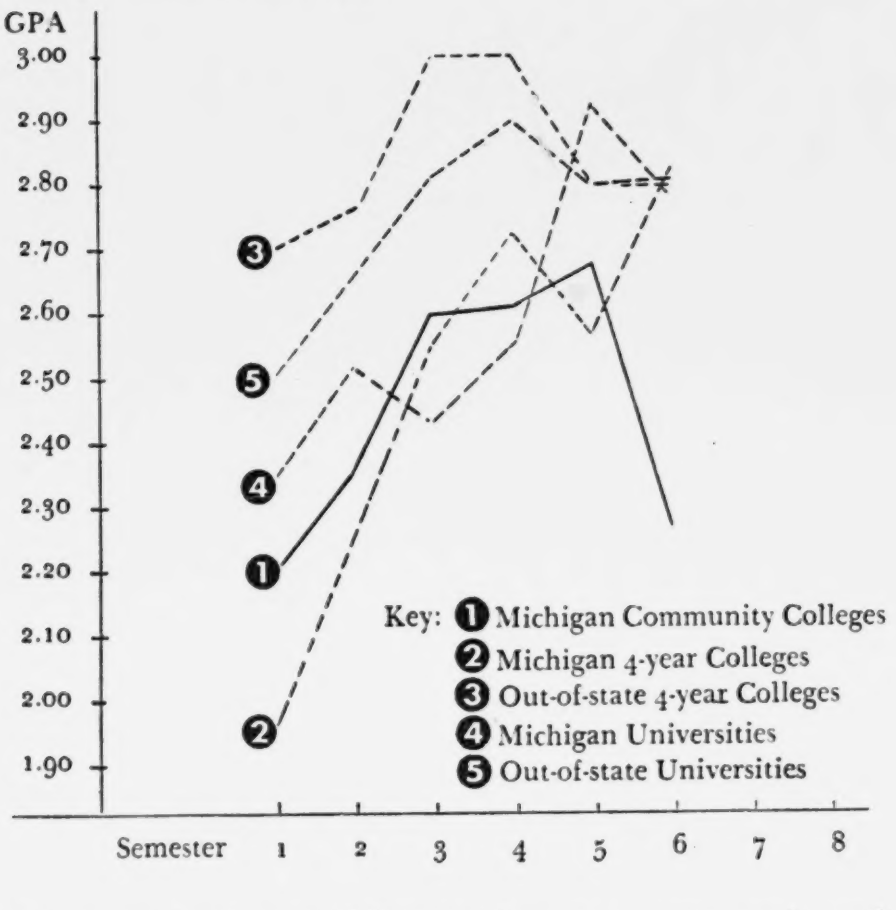


In general about 25% of LSA *freshmen* fail to make a C average and about 10% are dismissed during or at the end of the first year. We do not have current data on the academic mortality over the full four years. Figure 1 also shows that the highest quarter of the community college

transfers do quite good work; the lowest quarter, on the other hand, are probably in academic difficulty a good share of the time. I'm sorry not to have more detailed results available at this time. The data given here are part of a

FIGURE 2

Median Grade-point Averages, Semester by Semester, of Students Who Transferred to U/M College of LSA from Various Types of Colleges in the Fall of 1954.



larger study we are doing on the 1954, 1955, and 1956 transfer students, which, when I so sanguinely accepted this assignment last spring, I thought would be much nearer completion by now.

Although Figure 1 shows a general rise in GPA with time, neglecting the 14 cases who were here for six semesters, we may inquire how much of this is due to poor students dropping out and good ones remaining? Last February I looked at the records of all 55 students who had transferred to the Literary College from Michigan community colleges with junior standing in the fall of 1955 and were still in school three semesters later. These students had a mean GPA in their community colleges of 2.95; in their three semesters here they averaged 2.50, 2.61, and 2.65, and this is about .2 of a grade point below the average for all LSA students at the same class level. Only 10 of the 55 earned better grades their first semester here than they did in their community college, but 34 of them made better grades their third semester than they did their first.

In Figure 2 I have compared the performance of various subgroups of transfer students. The solid line is the same as the solid line of Figure 1, so you will notice that I have expanded the vertical scale and failed to show the zero point in Figure 2. If we again rule out the sixth semester, we find that students from the three types of Michigan institutions perform about equally well; students from out-of-state institutions do somewhat better. This latter result may be due to our higher selectivity for out-of-state admissions.

Although these data are for one year's transfer students only, studies of other groups have yielded essentially the same results. The academic average of students transferring from Michigan institutions to the University of Michigan College of Literature, Science, and the Arts is not as high as that of the remainder of the College's student body. This is not to say that these students are generally undesirable or that they are not benefiting from their college work. Nor is it to say that instruction is poor in the sending institution. One can think of a number of factors of selection, background, and experience which could contribute to the results as we find them.

One item to investigate, certainly, is the tested scholastic aptitude of transfer students. We began only this year systematically to test these people, so we have very little to report. A complicating factor, too, is the fact that students of this age are still growing mentally and we should expect transfer students, being older, to score higher than freshmen. Furthermore, college experience, and experience with the test itself, or with similar ones, may be expected to have some effect. With all these qualifications in mind, however, we may still get some benefit from looking at the data we do have which compare transfers with freshmen.

In 1955 we gave the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) of the College Entrance Examination Board to our freshmen; in 1956 we gave it to our transfers. As we expected, the older transfer students did better than the younger, but in addition the transfer students, who were almost 90% sophomores and juniors, averaged only about .15 of a standard deviation better than our freshmen. This difference is of no practical significance.

This year we started testing our transfer students with the same test we regularly give our freshmen, the American Council on Education Psychological Examination. The median total raw score was 122. I do not yet have the median for this year's freshmen, but for the 1956 freshmen it was 126. The score for the 1956 class, however, was somewhat better than those for the preceding few years, which ran from 117 to 119. The best data, for comparative purposes, would of course be obtained by retesting our own students at the same level as the incoming students. A second choice would be to procure the test scores our current students at these levels made when they were freshmen. In either case, my prediction would be that the median would be above 122. It appears then, that the transfer students are somewhat inferior in tested scholastic aptitude to the student body in which they find themselves after transfer. I should expect this difference to be more pronounced if we restricted our test data to students trans-

ferring from Michigan institutions only. If their academic records here had been uniformly good, we could rejoice that previous college experience was able to compensate for deficiencies in aptitude. The sad fact is, however, that this does not occur, and there seems to be no particular *academic* advantage for a student to spend a year or so in another college before coming here. On the other hand, there may be advantages of other sorts—economic and maturational, to name but two.

We may expect that we shall continue to have transfer students, probably in greater proportion than now if community colleges continue to expand. One problem we must face, then, is that of insuring that the transfer a student contemplates holds fair promise of being a rewarding educational experience for him. I certainly do not feel qualified to advise this audience on that matter, and what I have to suggest may be incredibly naive. I propose it simply in the hope that some of you with more wisdom than I can either make adaptations or replacements which will be more useful.

What I shall advocate is primarily an exchange and utilization of information. I have tried to make a small beginning here today in presenting some data from our study of transfer students. When this research is completed we shall be happy to make the pertinent results available to those who think they might find them useful. To complement this information, the sending colleges could make studies of their own, dealing with the performances of their students in the receiving institutions. Our Office of Registration and Records, for example, provides the sending institution with a transcript of the student's first-semester work, as soon as that is completed, and another, containing the entire record, is sent when the student is graduated. Now that we are testing a substantial portion of our transfer students, the Evaluation and Examinations Division will be glad to furnish the test scores, in terms of our own norms, if you will send us a roster of your students who

came to us. As time goes on and data accumulate you may be able to prepare a table of expectancies for prospective transfer students based on what you know about them and about other similar students who have actually made the transfer. Such a table should enable you, in counseling a student, to inform him of the probability of successful academic work here, to advise him whether he should limit his outside activities, and so on. I should think such arrangements would work to our mutual advantage.

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